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PROBLEMS THE HOMEMAKER MEETS AT THE DRY GOODS COUNTER

A radio talk by Miss Ruth O'Brien, Bureau of Home Economics, delivered through Station WRC and 32 other stations associated with the National Broadcasting Company, February 14, 1930.

We often laugh at the mistakes the young bride makes when she first begins shopping for her new home, but I sometimes wonder if we older house-makers do a very much better job now-a-days. Suppose we face the facts honestly for a few moments -- just among ourselves, of course.

When we go to make our purchases, how much real information do we have, regarding the various qualities of the articles offered us? How many of our choices are made on the basis of some gayly colored advertisement, which after all gave us only an inspired feeling and really told us nothing? How often do we base our selection entirely on the prices asked? In other words, how many purchases are sheer guesses? If we are honest with ourselves, we will admit that practically all of them are made in one of these ways.

This is particularly true of textile materials. Time was, when the number of different fabrics on the market was so small, and our experience with them so intimate, that we really could judge quality. But today, there are literally thousands of different kinds of materials on the dry goods counters. Most of them have been christened fancy names, which mean very little to us. Often they are made of new fibers about which we know nothing. How much information about all these can the consumer gain, by even the most diligent efforts? Very little, we are forced to admit. She can feel the fabric, pull it between her hands, and ask the clerk some questions. Usually about all he can do is to assure her that his customers have not complained about the material. This does not help very much. A recent study showed that less than 5% of a certain fabric of very poor quality was returned although it would not possibly give the service that was guaranteed. Too many of us forget when and where we purchased the fabric that faded or wore out so soon. We even forget whose product it was.

However, there are some of us who believe that, if this important business of homemaking is to be carried on successfully, it must first of all be based on sound business principles. And no business succeeds unless its purchasing is done intelligently. This means it must be done on the basis of facts and not by guess. For example, when the government buys sheets for the government hospitals, definite specifications as to thread count, tensile strength, weight and amount of finishing material, are set up and the sheeting furnished must comply with these specifications. Wouldn't it help us, if, when deciding between 3 or 4 different brands of sheets at the drygoods counter, we could know these facts about each and thus be able to determine which one best serves our purpose?

Some people insist that women will not take the trouble to learn

the meaning of terms like *tensile*, strength, thread count and such. And, of course, if we are to discuss the qualities of various articles intelligently we must know the words which describe them accurately. But it is my experience that we will all learn even very technical words if we are interested in the subject. And women are certainly interested now-a-days in doing more efficient purchasing. Have you ever listened to a group of children discussing their radios? I have- and marvelled at the words (so mysterious to me) which they use so glibly.

No, indeed, I believe that the consumers of this country can become as well informed as any purchasing agent. Having lived through the period in which women have acquired a working knowledge of such terms as calories, vitamins, and proteins, I have faith that they can learn the significance of any descriptive terms necessary to a working knowledge of fabric specifications.

At the Bureau of Home Economics, we get many letters asking us to suggest topics for club programs and various study groups. It seems to me this subject of family buying would be an excellent one. A whole series of programs could be planned in which its various aspects are considered. Each important commodity could be studied in detail, the qualities that can be judged by the consumer could be discussed, and ways and means worked out for getting a system of grading, or of specifications for the staple commodities so that they might be selected intelligently.

The Bureau will be glad to send you suggestions for such topics for your club programs, and literature from which talks and discussions can be prepared. Address the Bureau of Home Economics, U. S. Department of Agriculture, Washington, D. C.